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ABSTRACT

This booklet is the second in a series of four research reports that address problems in smaller American cities. The reports focus on issues of collaboration between public, private, and not-for-profit sectors in communities; profile urban issues in the context of strategies for systemic change; and suggest new models for strengthening communities. This report introduces the reader to the role deliberation can play in creating new opportunities for communities to work together in more productive ways. The report draws on statistical and educational research to support the thesis that deliberative discussions can help a community learn its own strengths and weaknesses and can help bolster its confidence in its ability to change itself for the better. Using a Community Convention (a contemporary version of the New England town meeting) as a vehicle, the report explores the possibility of achieving a representative voice from all community segments. Several examples of the Convention at work are given, and an appendix lists possible Community Convention processes. (SLD)

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DELIBERATIVE

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LEADERSHIP COLLABORATION SERIES

# Building Deliberative Communities

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**BUILDING DELIBERATIVE COMMUNITIES** is the second in a series of four research reports commissioned by the Pew Partnership for Civic Change, a national program funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts, to address problems in smaller American cities. The project and its reports focus on issues of collaboration between public, private, and not-for-profit sectors in communities; profile urban issues in the context of strategies for systemic change; and suggest new models for strengthening communities. For more information about the Pew Partnership, write Pew Partnership for Civic Change, 145-C Ednam Drive, Charlottesville, VA 22903, call 804-971-2073, or fax 804-971-7042.

# Building Deliberative Communities

Leadership Collaboration Series

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# Editor's Note

This series is based on the caveat that citizen leaders are critical to the democratic process. Citizen participation in the public decision-making process is both a foundation of American democracy, as well as its mainstay. Thomas Jefferson argued vociferously to maintain citizens' freedom to express, discuss, and decide. Hannah Arendt wrote eloquently in *On Revolution* about Jefferson's emphasis on the importance of the deliberative public. "Jefferson had at least a foreboding of how dangerous it might be to allow a people a share in public power without providing them at the same time, with more public space than the ballot box and more opportunity to make their voices heard...than election day." (Arendt 1965, p. 256)

The Pew Partnership for Civic Change is working to create innovative, community collaborations between government, business, non-profits, and citizens, to address complex issues. The grantee communities are building collaborations, yet still underscore the need for citizen leadership skills and habits in order to build even stronger, more effective collaboratives. In response, we have established this leadership collaboration series to provide practical approaches for the development of a collaborative leadership community. To encourage conversation about civic leadership, we have asked four authors of diverse backgrounds to address the topic of building new civic leadership approaches within communities.

In this second essay, Michael Briand introduces the reader to the role deliberation can play in creating new opportunities for communities to work together in more productive ways. Briand's argument draws on statistical and educational research to support the thesis that deliberative discussions can help a community learn its own strengths and weaknesses, and can

help bolster its confidence in its ability to change itself for the better. Using a Community Convention as a vehicle, Briand's essay explores the possibility of achieving a representative voice from all community segments. Briand's brief description of his experience with a Community Convention gives a firm example of what this vehicle can contribute.

The other three papers in the Leadership Collaboration series examine other, different aspects of developing community leadership. In the first of the series, *Building Healthy Communities*, Bruce Adams describes the elements of a healthy civic community, with examples of the contrasts between productive and divisive communities. Jeanne Porter, the author of the third issue, describes in the context of South Carolina's Penn Center, ways communities can create diverse leadership cadres working toward common goals. Suzanne Morse concludes the series by exploring the importance of citizen involvement in creating sustainable, collaborative communities. We hope you find these four essays timely and helpful, and encourage you to use each booklet as a handbook to encourage both self-evaluation and change within your broader community.

Tonya M. Yoder
Editor

# The Problem of Politics

In the United States today, we confront a host of stubborn problems: violent crime, drug use, overflowing landfills, slow economic growth, teenage pregnancy, child abuse, budgetary constraints, racial tension, crumbling roads, undereducated graduates, traffic congestion, pollution. Every community is facing serious problems. The problems differ from place to place, varying in nature and degree. But all communities have one thing in common: they're struggling to solve the problems they face.

The most serious problem of all, however, may be **politics**—the institutional mechanisms we rely on for making public decisions. In recent years, politics has consistently failed to generate effective public responses to the problems troubling Americans most. According to professors Lawrence Susskind and Jeffrey Cruikshank, in our country today "we are at an impasse. ...Whenever [our] leaders try to set standards, allocate resources, or make policy...we can expect a fight." One result is the "NIMBY" ("not-in-my-backyard") phenomenon. Susskind and Cruikshank point out that "almost every effort to build prisons, highways, power plants, mental health facilities, and low-income housing is blocked by people who live nearby... [Thus, for example,] not a single hazardous waste treatment plant has been built in this country since 1975, even though everybody knows we need such plants." [1] Yet even when policy decisions are made, they're often ineffective because pub-

lic support for them isn't strong enough or can't be sustained long enough for success.

Clearly, traditional American political responses are not working well. What we usually think of as politics—the business of campaigning, voting, lobbying, debating policies, enacting legislation—isn't getting the job done. The public and the government are at odds, government itself is fragmented, and the public is fractured by divisions it finds hard to overcome. Moreover, citizens feel shut out of the decision-making process. They believe they have been abandoned by public officials who are out of touch with the concerns of ordinary citizens and who respond only to the persistent demands of organized interests. People see no way to participate meaningfully in this sort of politics.

Politics-as-we-know-it has produced gridlock and a rising tide of anger. If politics solved problems effectively without substantial public involvement, or if the public felt meaningfully involved despite the difficulty of making inroads into the problems we face, frustration and exasperation might be lower. But because politics fails to solve problems *and* shuts ordinary citizens out of the process, people are losing hope and patience. Citizens have lost their place in the government that is supposed to have been *of* and *by* the people. Although research indicates Americans haven't yet reached the point of despair, they are disillusioned.

For their part, public officials are often as frustrated with the public as the public is with them. Officials find it nearly impossible to have

productive discussions with ordinary citizens. They see too many people who are impatient, emotional, intolerant of ambiguity and complexity, ill-informed, concerned only with their narrow interests, and unwilling to face up to and accept unavoidable costs and trade-offs. Although they continue to hold town meetings and open hearings, visit organizations, and take polls, most public officials assume there are only two options for governing the community. One is to listen to the public's concerns, exercise their own best judgment, and then devise and implement a policy. The other alternative public officials see is to let the community make decisions directly through referenda. They see no middle ground between these two extremes, no way of governing *with* the public. As a result, public meetings usually produce little in the way of genuine deliberation. Public officials use the opportunity to sell or defend decisions they have already made or feel they will have to make. Citizens seize the opportunity to criticize, blame, and oppose official action, or inaction.

## Consumers & Producers

Political analyst William Schneider contends most Americans are "pragmatists." [2] They believe what works is right. They support policies—and policymakers—that produce results. But politics as it is currently practiced in the United States is anything but pragmatic. It's "political" in the worst sense: concerned not

with the substance of issues, but with personalities and the exercise of power in seats of government, or the fluctuating opinions of average Americans. Alarmingly—at least from the perspective of political elites—these folks are growing increasingly restive. Fed up with the inability of public institutions to solve serious problems, they are deeply unhappy with their political system. In their view, they pay good money for the services of the professionals who run those institutions, and they expect those persons to use their power, expertise, resources, and political authority to solve public problems for them.

Therein lies a difficulty. People imagine obtaining good public policy responses to public problems is like buying a product. We assume experts and government officials can and should produce good policy products. If they don't, then, as in the marketplace, we have to look elsewhere. Americans believe they aren't getting from their political institutions the sort of performance and service they have a right to expect based on their support. When Americans don't get good service, they get impatient. People say, in effect, "If you can't solve our problems, then at least quit spending money on them." Their annoyance is compounded by their feeling of lack of control over the elites making policy. Unfortunately, the only alternative many people can conceive of is the absence of government. Hence the calls to limit government.

Politics, as we approach it in our country today, can be understood best by comparing it to economics. Citizens are thus consumers of

the political goods and services supplied by producers—elected officials, interest group directors, and corporate CEOs. This model divides people into two categories: those who do things in response to public problems, and those for whom things are done. As professor John McKnight points out, our social map makes a conceptual division between individuals and institutions. [3] McKnight believes this social map is inaccurate because it excludes the domain of the community. The community is "the social place used by...neighbors, neighborhood associations, clubs, civic groups, local enterprises, churches, ethnic associations, temples, local unions, local government, and local media." McKnight explains this exclusion by asserting that "many institutional leaders...simply do not believe in the capacities of communities."

## Institutional vs. Democratic Leadership

Like McKnight, I believe the prevailing conception of leadership in our country today rests on the assumption of a political division of labor. The predominant view of leadership derives, in other words, from a model in which the world is divided into producers and consumers. The way we think of leadership is a function of having divided the world into doers and those-for-whom-things-are-done.

# Ideas on Deliberation: Background Readings

Many authors talk about the importance of deliberation to our democracy; listed below are a few who have informed this study.

Jane Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy*, University of Chicago Press, 1983.

Mansbridge says the conceptions of democracy are contradictory; some are appropriate to situations in which we have common interests and some to those in which they conflict. In order for a polity and its institutions to conform to American ideals, they must handle common and conflicting interests consistently.

David Mathews, *Politics for People: Finding a Responsible Public Voice*, University of Illinois Press, 1994.

Mathews describes how people become politically engaged, how they build civic communities, and how they generate political energy or public will. He argues that political discussion is the doorway into politics, and he makes a case for leavening partisan debate with more public dialogue.

Daniel Yankelovich, *Coming to Public Judgment: Making Democracy Work in a Complex World*, Syracuse University Press, 1991.

Yankelovich offers a prescription for strengthening the public's hand in its silent power struggle with the experts, by focusing on an issue of rising concern to all: the American public's eroding ability to influence its own future.

McKnight contends "our roles as citizens and our communities have been traded in for the right to clienthood and consumer status." We have forgotten, he writes, "about the capacity of every single one of us to do good work." As a consequence, we mistakenly imagine "that our society has a problem in terms of effective human services." But in reality "our essential problem is weak communities. ...[W]e have reached the limits of institutional problem-solving." We have reached them because we believe our institutions are "where things can be done right, [where] a kind of orderly perfection [can be] achieved...[in which] the ablest dominate."

Charles Anderson echoes McKnight's critique by writing that, although all theories of policy science recognize public decision-making as a social process, their teaching seems to imply that any single person who analyzes the situation logically and dispassionately can ascertain the best course of action. [4] In other words, political experts assume it is possible apolitically to determine what is best for society.

Douglas Torgerson's description of "a dream of the abolition of politics—of putting an end to the strife and confusion of human society in favor of an orderly administration of things based upon objective knowledge," proves untenable. [5] Political knowledge can be obtained only through deliberative, democratic politics. Experts who ignore ordinary peoples' anecdotes and examples, and pretend complete and objective knowledge open themselves to McKnight's criticism. He argues that democratic community

rests on the recognition of fallibility. Community associations "proliferate until they create a place for everyone... This democratic opportunity structure assumes that the best idea is the sum of the knowledge of the collected fallible people who are citizens... Effective associational life incorporates all those fallibilities and reveals the unique intelligence of community."

The institutional conception of leadership, assuming an elite few can know best what to do, contrasts markedly with the democratic conception, assuming the community as a whole possesses the only capacity to respond effectively to public problems. The institutional conception of leadership is thus inappropriate for a society of democratic communities composed of citizens who have the capacity as well as the responsibility to act effectively in response to public problems. It is inappropriate because it replaces the role of citizen with the roles of consumers, clients, and victims.

## We, the Public

In a provocative, recent article on education, professor Benjamin Barber remarks "the social contract that obliges adults to pay taxes so that children can be educated is in imminent danger of collapse." [6] Barber argues the education crisis stems from a simple source: "an absence of democratic will." Americans, he contends, are not serious about educational reform. Our inaction clearly shows we're unwilling to pay the

price for educational excellence. Barber asks, "Is it because the challenge is too great? or is it because…we aren't really serious?… To me the conclusion is inescapable: we are not serious."

Notice in Barber's remarks the use of the plural pronoun, **we**. When Barber says **we** aren't serious about education, when he says **we** lack the will to do something about the educational crisis, he means **we** as a country, as a society. This is significant. Barber does not mean we as individuals aren't serious, aren't willing to pay the price, aren't able to summon the will to act. For all we know, the vast majority of Americans care deeply about education and are serious about wanting to solve the educational crisis. But that's not the same thing as being serious and prepared to act as a society, or a community.

Eugenie Gatens-Robinson has written that "we as a people have not taken at full reckoning what it would take to transform our educational, economic, and social institutions, our public life and its environment." [7] Gatens-Robinson is exactly right: We do not make decisions about how we should address the problems confronting our society. We have abdicated this responsibility to political professionals. As Gatens-Robinson observes, "we have…relegated …public practices…to the arena of expertise and have professionalized our social responses… We as a people…must actively come to see what is required of us."

What is required is the ability and willingness to deliberate, and to make sound judgments as a public. As Michael Kinsley has remarked, "the

central problem of American politics [is] the inability of the electorate to deal with the hard reality we all had to learn as small children: that more of something usually means less of something else... Our refusal to acknowledge that trade-offs are necessary...makes intelligent debate about...trade-offs impossible." [8] Our communities and our country aren't making much headway toward solving problems because, as a public, we aren't making genuine public choices.

A recent report by journalist Elizabeth Royte illustrates this point. A rural West Virginia county had serious unemployment and underdevelopment problems. County officials considered and pursued several policies designed to bring jobs and money into their area. Eventually, a proposal was developed to create a landfill for out-of-state solid waste. The county studied the proposal carefully. Public officials talked with people about the proposal. They publicized it and held public meetings. Only a handful of people even had questions about the project. Literally no one opposed it. Yet just as the contract was about to be signed, a protest movement materialized. In the end, four years after it was proposed, the project had to be abandoned, and the county is now back to square one. [9]

This story shows that any solution standing a chance of ameliorating a problem must emerge from a decision-making process enabling the public as a whole—everyone affected by the problem, any attempt to solve it, or the belief he or she will be affected—to reach a sound, col-

lective judgment. The examples are legion of communities whose leaders think they have found a solution, only to discover the consensus they believed existed was illusory or unsustainable. Unless the process of defining the problem, identifying possible solutions, deliberating, and establishing priorities enables everyone to reach a stable judgment grounded in careful analysis, the public will not have made a genuine choice, one enabling it to move forward with widespread, sustained commitment. [10]

## Meaningful Participation

In the 1990s, governments can no longer expect to respond effectively to public problems by unilaterally devising solutions, publicizing their decisions, and expecting these to be implemented after only a brief explanation. The public must be involved in a meaningful way from the outset.

A community cannot make lasting progress toward solving its problems unless it involves members of the community. The public includes the silent majority not usually involved in public affairs. It's not essential, or even desirable, that every citizen participate all the time. But everyone must have had the opportunity to take part. Moreover, he or she must feel entitled to participate, welcome to join in, and able to influence public decisions. If a person chooses not to participate, he or she should nevertheless be assured others will effectively articulate his

experiences, needs, and concerns in the process of responding to the community's collective problems.

An effective public policy-making process has to make room for full participation for at least two reasons. People are angry about the way their public affairs are being handled. They feel frustrated by their inability to make their concerns known and their influence felt. They don't want someone to speak for them. They don't believe their interests can be represented by anyone but themselves. If ordinary citizens are not significantly involved in the decision-making process, any solutions will lack the widespread support they require. People left out of the process will assert themselves by blocking problem-solving efforts.

Also, elites can be overly wedded to their favorite solutions to permit a fresh, practical reconsideration of persistent problems. Currently, politics both entices and forces elites to defend the positions they have staked out because their power and their jobs depend on them. For genuinely public, and hence effective, policies to be devised, the decision-making process requires the moderating influence of people who don't see the issue as cut and dried, and who therefore are able to bring creativity to bear on the efforts to resolve it.

Meaningful public participation requires face-to-face political discussion. In the absence of face-to-face interaction there is a tendency to see political opponents as distasteful caricatures. When people hear directly from fellow citizens,

the choice confronting the public is rendered vivid, immediate, and genuine. Face-to-face exchange enables people to develop a more complex, more human, more realistic picture of their fellow citizens. They begin to understand their fellow citizens' motivations to maintain strongly held opinions. Face-to-face discussion thus compels us to recognize the moral standing of our fellow citizens. It encourages people to live up to commitments they make in the course of reaching a public decision, making citizens more accountable, and thus also more reliable partners.

Two other challenges confront communities involving the public in charting their future. One is the absence of readily usable public forums where citizens and policymakers can deliberate together. By far the greater challenge is the sheer practical difficulty of carrying on a sustained, informed discussion among a large audience.

These requirements translate into four criteria for a legitimate decision-making process:

- Ordinary folks as well as politically active elites must have the opportunity to participate.
- Discussion must be face-to-face.
- Discussions must take place in a safe, respected setting where all citizens will feel inclined to deliberate together.
- The process must enable a large number of people to carry on a sustained discussion.

Having outlined the goal, the practical question becomes "By what mechanism can we involve the public in such a way that these four criteria are satisfied?"

# Contact List: Who Is Helping Build Deliberative Communities

Study Circles Resource Center
PO Box 203
Pomfret, CT 06258
phone: 860/928-2616
Contact: Francine Nichols or Molly Barrett

National Issues Forums
100 Commons Road
Dayton, OH 45459-2777
phone: 800/433-7834
Contact: Anna Lee Sawdy

Citizens Jury
7101 York Avenue South
Minneapolis, MN 55435
phone: 612/333-5300
Contact: Ned Crosby

Community Self-Leadership Project
Campus Box 308 (Davis 144)
Trinidad State Junior College
Trinidad, CO 81082
phone: 719/846-5240
Contact: Michael Briand

# Learning & Practicing Deliberative Skills

Community-wide deliberation can take many forms. However, many citizens have never properly learned how to start or maintain a public discussion—they assume a dialogue in the media's presentation of an issue, but rarely feel compelled to contribute their own take on the story. As John Gastil says in his book *Democracy in Small Groups*, "The ability to articulate cannot be taken for granted, because people do not always have a clear perspective and the ability to express their point of view. Learning how to recognize and distinguish between self-interest and the interests of the group is an important skill, as is learning how to transform unreflective and disparate opinions into sound group judgments. In general, articulation serves democracy by bringing forward the minority and majority views of the group and filling the well of ideas from which the demos draws." [11]

Many groups and institutions have struggled with the learning process, coming up with several ways of stimulating true community deliberation. The Study Circles Resource Center and the National Issues Forum are examples of national organizations encouraging citizen discussion and deliberation. Citizen Juries, created by Ned Crosby, and the Community Convention model, presented in detail here, are two other programs based on the deliberative approach being used in communities.

Founded in 1990, The Study Circles Resource Center is a nonpartisan organization promoting the use of study circles as a vehicle for discussing critical social and political issues. The Center is based on the premise that, in order to function at its potential, our democracy requires the participation of a concerned, informed public. The Center provides materials and assistance for grassroots discussions in groups of 5 to 15 people. The materials help participants break down complex issues—like race, school reform, and community violence—into more manageable facets, and provide different perspectives of the dilemma.

The National Issues Forum (NIF), founded in 1982, takes its theme from Jefferson's notion that we should inform citizens' discretion by education. To this end, thousands of civic and educational organizations, colleges and universities, libraries, service clubs, and membership groups hold forums each year. Although each community group is locally managed, all are part of a national network of individuals and organizations committed to deliberation and public dialogue. Each year the local forum convenors select three issues of national and local importance. NIF participants discuss issues ranging from health care reform to America's role in the world. Background issue books and related materials on each topic present the information on issues, in the form of choices for action.

The Citizen Jury is an idea that has been researched and promulgated by the Jefferson Center since 1974. The Center has developed a

format for convening nationally representative groups of voters to debate public policy and character issues facing candidates for public office. The voters receive background packets, then gather in a convention to question the candidates. After three days of deliberation and hearings, they vote on their preferences, giving the voters at large a chance to listen to an informed debate.

A common theme in these and other deliberative vehicles is how to find a clear community voice given a particular issue. Participants and the larger community need to get a true reading of the community's judgment in order for the discussion to achieve broad impact. This validation of community voice often requires coordination and connections between the myriad discussions taking place. One model for achieving this is the Community Convention.

## "Community Convention"

The Community Convention is a contemporary version of the New England town meeting. Inspired by professor James Fishkin's "deliberative opinion poll" and National Issues Convention ideas, the Convention is designed to afford a community the opportunity to deliberate, while ensuring that participants are as representative as possible of the community as a whole. In short, it adapts the inclusiveness and face-to-face quality of the original town meeting to the much larger communities of today.

# How-To: Building a Community Convention

Undoubtedly, the most challenging component of a Community Convention is organizing a potentially large number of small open public forums. For example, consider a community of 150,000, of which two-thirds are adults. Of these, let's assume that as many as 75,000 want to participate in the process. To accommodate this, a community would have to have at least two rounds of small open forums. After each preliminary round, delegates from each forum would repeat those discussions in the next round. In a city of 150,000, the first round might consist of as many as 1,500 forums of up to 50 persons each. In the second round, 1,500 representatives from the first-round forums might assemble in 30 forums of up to 50 persons each. Finally, 30 second-round forum delegates would be joined by an additional 40 to 50 persons selected randomly to capture the community's diverse makeup to participate in the Convention proper. [12]

A community could also select Convention participants from two random samples: one drawing from participants in a single round of a limited number of open public forums, the other drawing from those who have not attended. This option calls for anywhere from six to twenty-four forums in various sites throughout the community. A random sample of forum participants would attend the Convention. A non-participant sample of citizens reflecting the community's diversity would join them. If logistically it seems impractical to hold any open public forums at all, then a community might consider relying exclusively on random samples (version 4 in the table).

The process can take one of several routes, however, it should combine an open, self-selected participation process with a random, representative sample of a community's residents to achieve the widest possible perspective. Self-selected participation is possible through multiple rounds of small forums held over the course of several weeks in various locations. Each is open to anyone. Locations are selected to draw in persons who typically steer clear of public affairs. Sites should be close-by, and socially, culturally, and politically safe. After each forum, participants select a representative for succeeding rounds of the community-wide discussion. The open forums maximize the opportunities for active citizen participation. They ensure ordinary people's concerns, needs, and aspirations will be transmitted to the Convention proper. This culminating event uses the same framing of the problem and the same deliberative methods employed in the open forums.

The Community Convention approximates a genuinely inclusive discussion. Clearly, however, even in medium-sized cities it isn't feasible to assemble tens of thousands of people in one place to deliberate the community's options and reach a public judgment on possible actions. The next best thing is to combine opportunities for active participation in small open forums with an event reflecting the diversity of the community. For more specific examples of methodologies, please refer to the Appendix.

Perhaps the biggest challenge Convention participants face is how to connect with their

fellow citizens and public officials. Delegates have a number of options. One is to promote their general action directives, encouraging officials to take steps consistent with the direction they've set. A second possibility is to work with representatives of other organizations and public officials to identify courses of action the community can follow. A third option is to simply publicize the conclusions, without asking for action. Fourth, delegates can continue their discussions, refining their direction, and developing strategies to pursue it. Through continuing mini-Conventions they can, in time, build a critical mass for support of a particular resolution to the community's problems.

Once the Convention has concluded, it is essential for the group to report the results of their deliberations to the larger community either through video or audio programming. An edited version should highlight exchanges illustrating the process of public deliberation and capturing the substantive outcomes as they emerge from the process.

It is important to help the local news media—and the community watching or listening to the report—to understand the essence of the Convention and to distinguish it from politics-as-usual. The real story of public deliberation in a Community Convention is not the tally for or against different options, people's comments taken out of context, or the conclusions individuals have reached, but rather the give and take, the reflection, the grappling with a problem, the weighing of consequences of the group as a

whole. The Convention should be reported not as a referendum, but as a conversation among citizens. What was the real struggle and why did it turn out the way it did? What were the turning points? How did they resolve conflicts? Were they able to understand and acknowledge each other's viewpoints even if they disagreed with them? What common ground did they find? In short, what collective voice did they articulate for their community?

A significant point of agreement in the community of Trinidad-Las Animas county, based on post-Convention questionnaires, was the simple usefulness of community deliberation. At the end of the process, 98% thought they would probably participate in another, similar Convention. One participant said: "Participation in the Community Convention process has given me valuable skills that I am now applying to my involvement in other groups."

## Sponsorship from & Support of Community Organizations

Clearly, a community setting out to hold a Convention will have to be serious about the time and effort required. A Community Convention will support itself. There should be no need to allocate public funds or to raise money. It is in the interest of every citizen, every

organization, and every institution—newspapers, TV and radio stations, churches, libraries, schools, businesses, community foundations, neighborhood groups, humanities councils, professional associations, civic organizations, etc.—to contribute time, energy, physical space, and employee released time. If people need payment for their contribution, it's better to proceed without them until they discover they can advance their interests better by contributing than by remaining a passive spectator or free rider.

Someone will have to take the initiative to get the Convention rolling. The best place for a genuine public discussion to originate is with citizens whose desire for a particular outcome does not overwhelm their loyalty to the principle of inclusive, deliberative community decision-making. What is needed at the outset is a workably small group of citizens who are seen as committed to the principles and processes of pragmatic, citizen-centered, deliberative public discussion. Care must be taken when enlisting the aid of persons and organizations whose resources, standing, reputation, or prominence seem to make them the obvious organizers of such an undertaking. It is precisely these assets that can render them suspect in the eyes of many who must not be left out of the conversation. Don't reject them out of hand, but be wary of people who are used to using their power and influence to get things done. They sometimes confuse the community good with their own agendas.

Bearing this caveat in mind, it should nevertheless be possible to identify allies for getting a

Convention rolling: the public library, a community college, the League of Women Voters, a community foundation, the daily and weekly newspapers, the local citizens' league, a public TV station, an interfaith council, or a service organization. Depending on your issue, other organizations may be willing to help organize the process. Organizations such as leadership groups, chambers of commerce, neighborhood associations, and professional associations, can be approached, though it's important to keep in mind that enlisting the cooperation of one kind of organization might necessitate balancing your organizers with people who initially take a different view of the matter to be discussed. If you want to take up race relations, for example, your organizing group obviously shouldn't be composed of people of just one race. If you want to discuss your community's economic development, you ought to have someone from an anti- or slow-growth organization as well as the Chamber of Commerce.

In general, it's desirable for your organizing group to be viewed as non-partisan, civic-minded, diversely-constituted, even-handed, and process-oriented. While you can't guarantee the discussions themselves will live up to the same standards as your organizing group, you can make sure to include persons who represent the range of perspectives, interests, and attitudes existing in the community. And don't forget about people who might seem indifferent. They might care a great deal, but just haven't often been involved in the past.

# The Trinidad—Las Animas Community Convention

Trinidad, CO lies twenty miles north of New Mexico at the eastern edge of the Rocky Mountains. Trinidad is the county seat of Las Animas County, stretching almost 200 miles from west to east, making it the sixth largest in the US. Its modest population of 13,000 is growing at a much slower rate than the rest of Colorado, and is defined by both the State and federal governments as "economically depressed and rurally isolated."

In November 1994, Trinidad State Junior College, serving southern Colorado, announced its sponsorship of the first Trinidad—Las Animas County "Community Convention." The process began in January of 1995 with a series of eight open public forums held in various County locations. Each forum addressed the question, "Growth and Development in Las Animas County: How Fast? How Much? Which Direction?" The process culminated with the Convention proper; a day and a half of intensive deliberation.

Delegates concluded a moderate degree of growth in the County is both inevitable and desirable. They looked favorably on growth, provided it does not harm the quality of life residents currently enjoy. Delegates also expressed a desire to more fully realize certain qualities not as widely appreciated or fully developed as they should be. For example, delegates noted a lack of community pride, reflecting poorly on the area as a whole.

Delegates examined several options for encouraging development. Tourism appealed to the group because the County already has many of the ingredients needed to make it a success, and because building the local

economy around the area's natural and cultural heritage would help sustain the quality and character of life. For similar reasons, delegates welcomed the prospect of "clean" industries and encouraging relocation there.

Delegates concluded: "By making our communities into the kinds of places we want to live in, we will take an important step toward making them attractive as well to tourists, new employers, and new residents." Specifically, delegates resolved to:

- Open a constructive, collaborative conversation with their fellow citizens.
- Create new opportunities and settings in which citizens and public officials can work together, as partners.
- Plan for the future.
- Address several specific problems immediately.

Delegates concluded their work with a published report to their fellow citizens and an invitation to join the work. Currently, they are establishing a county-wide citizens' organization to serve as a vehicle for both taking action and creating opportunities for public deliberation. One participant commented that "although I've always had the right to use open meetings of governing boards, councils, and commissions as an opportunity to participate in public decision-making, I simply didn't exercise that right. The Community Convention process makes it easy, convenient, and worthwhile for citizens like me to participate."

## "Public Terms"

When people read about a problem or issue in the newspaper or see a report on television, when they hear politicians, experts, and advocates talk about it, they're usually treated to an indecipherable debate about solutions, obscuring what is really at stake. What passes for public discussion typically glosses over or ignores the deep concerns people feel. One source of Americans' alleged apathy about policy issues is the failure of our public discourse to engage public interest in those issues. People get promises of benefits to be reaped and warnings of harms to be suffered by adopting a particular policy. But those prospective outcomes don't speak directly to what people care about most.

As a result, people aren't clear about what the issues really are. People can't relate to the debate because it isn't an authentic reflection of their concerns. Perhaps stimulating the economy will increase the budget deficit. Why should I care? Maybe tests scores of educational performance are falling. Why should I be concerned? Unless public policy issues are framed to demonstrate the consequences of different responses, the debate won't engage people. If people don't see the relevance of an issue to the things they care about, they won't feel they have a stake in the decisions or be able to work out choices.

Public problems persist largely because we confine ourselves to debating solutions for them. We don't get past arguments about *what*

*to **do***. This happens because we don't take time to understand the problem well enough to deal with the fundamental issues. How we should respond to a problem should be the last matter we discuss. To progress toward solving a problem, we need to step back from solutions. Before we can identify and evaluate our options, we need to understand exactly what the problem is, what's at stake, and hence why it's so difficult to come up with an effective, supportable response.

A productive public discussion depends on making sure *all* perspectives on the problem are incorporated into its description. The problem outline must fairly and sympathetically encompass the outlooks of every segment of the public. Granted, this comprehensiveness is an aspiration not to be realized perfectly. For people to feel the discussion process is fair and will serve their interests better than more adversarial strategies, they need to be assured that their particular views will receive an honest hearing.

Because no single gathering of citizens can include everyone, the full diversity of a community won't be reflected in any deliberative model. However, the community's full diversity can be captured through a well-planned process. This means that public forum participants must guard against the temptation to believe their views are representative. Because it's impossible to assemble a truly diverse group of citizens, participants should discover what other community members think, so even if they aren't physically present, the group will take their views into account.

## Public Judgments

Community Conventions, like the other forums mentioned, add a new dimension to public life. They illustrate how important the public voice is to a vital democracy, and how much work is involved in achieving a genuine public judgment. As important, they reveal the need for mechanisms both allowing and encouraging the public to be heard about the business of living in a community on a regular, consistent basis.

Every public problem raises an issue concerning what ought to receive priority. Prioritizing creates problems because the things people care about typically conflict with each other. They frequently prove incompatible because obtaining one thing often means having to go without some other thing. Which of two good things should you choose? In either case you face a dilemma.

Such conflict is an inescapable fact of life. Sometimes conflict occurs because we simply don't have enough resources. Sometimes, however, conflict occurs because the good things are naturally incompatible—as when we choose to protect freedom of speech, thereby unavoidably slighting the value of being able to live without being exposed to disturbing or offensive talk. It's not just that we can't afford to pursue them equally. Rather, the good things are qualitatively different. Trade-offs are inevitable, meaning we face hard choices between the good things we care about.

The need to choose—both individually and collectively—thus lies at the heart of politics and enforces the need for deliberative forums. As John Stuart Mill says in *Principles of Political Economy*, "it is hardly possible to overrate the value…of placing human beings in contact with persons dissimilar to themselves, and with modes of thought and action unlike those with which they are familiar… Such communication has always been, and is peculiarly in this present age, one of the primary sources of progress." [13] In instances of conflict between things we consider good, valuable, or desirable, it's bad enough we feel torn. But the choice we face is doubly tough because typically there's nowhere to turn for an authoritative, definitive answer to the question of how to prioritize. There's no principle, no benevolent authority to tell us what's best to do in every situation. What's best to do depends on the circumstances: who and what are involved or affected, what are the consequences of favoring the one thing, and so forth. Our existing rules and convictions do not determine fully what's right or most rational. They never will, because every situation to which we might apply them will be unique. Consequently, when we encounter situations in which good things conflict, we can't rely on our knowledge. Still less can we count on logic to tell us what to do. Ultimately, we have to depend on our judgment.

A public judgment consists of a shared sense of our public priorities. Such a judgment is not the same thing as complete agreement or con-

sensus. Nor is it simple compromise. Rather, a public judgment represents a shared conclusion about what is best, all things considered. A public judgment never loses sight of the importance of the good things that may have to be assigned relatively less emphasis in order to resolve a conflict. Accordingly, it insists they be respected insofar as possible. In practice, a public judgment is achieved when people can say phrases such as "what we can all live with" or "what everyone can go along with." Of course, in some cases a public judgment may prove elusive. There is no guarantee political opponents will acknowledge the validity of each other's needs and concerns. But a public judgment is a practical objective, attainable through patient and persistent deliberation.

It is crucial to understand the distinction between a genuine public judgment and a simple collection of uncritically accepted beliefs or preferences we happen to have at a given time. A poll, for example, is often only an indication of what individuals are inclined to say about a problem or issue before they've had a chance to deliberate together. Polling statistics are furthest from a public judgment when the individual views they record aren't the product of genuine individual judgments. Toting up individual views can not represent a genuine public judgment even if those views are real individual judgments. Why? Because at the collective level there is no comprehension of the conflicting good things, no recognition of the consequences of pursuing different options, no establishment of priorities.

# Conclusion

No matter how well designed, a Community Convention, or any other deliberative forum, won't succeed unless everyone understands and accepts that deliberating together as members of a community is a job for tough-minded, hard-headed, pragmatic people, who realize this isn't a perfect world, there is no perfect solution, and we can't have everything. It's not a job for the faint-hearted, the weak, the undisciplined, the sentimental, or the self-indulgent. Nobody should compromise just for the sake of achieving consensus. Nobody should sacrifice beliefs or values or interests they consider non-negotiable. But nobody should be let off the hook, either. Every citizen has a civic duty to perform, one every bit as serious as a member of a jury has in a court of law. If they aren't willing to take this responsibility seriously and put some effort into it, then they should step aside and let those of their fellow citizens who are willing to do so get on with the work.

Finally, the Community Convention is not an end in itself, but a catalyst for public discussion. It has the potential to make local decision-making more effective and productive by making it more pragmatic, citizen-centered, and deliberative. The Convention is an idea that needs to be tested in a wide variety of settings and circumstances. Although it represents an experiment, it is built on principles and methods developed through many years of experience; concepts like James S. Fishkin's National Issues Convention,

or the lessons about public judgment learned from Daniel Yankelovich's work are keys to building models of participation that encourage deliberation. [14] The key to effective democratic politics is the health of our public relationships, whether among ordinary citizens or between citizens and public officials. As Hannah Arendt said in *Men in Dark Times*: "Even where the world is still halfway in order, or kept halfway in order, the public realm has lost the power of illumination which was originally part of its very nature. More and more people in the countries of the Western world, which since the decline of the ancient world has regarded freedom from politics as one of the basic freedoms, make use of this freedom and have retreated from the world and their obligations within it. This withdrawal from the world need not harm an individual; he may even cultivate great talents to the point of genius and so by detour be useful to the world again. But with each such retreat an almost demonstrable loss to the world takes place; what is lost is the specific and usually irreplaceable in-between which should have formed between this individual and his fellow men." [15]

A Community Convention can help us rediscover the importance of those in-between relationships and strengthen our ability to think, talk, and work together to identify effective responses to the problems confronting us. Communities have much to gain by considering the Community Convention as a device for revitalizing their local democracy, as well as the interconnectedness of their citizens.

## *Appendix: Possible Community Convention Processes*

| | *Catalyzing Event* | *Interim Period* | *Culminating Event* |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | random community sample | community forums open to all, possibly including original sample | delegates from open community forums |
| 2. | random community sample | community forums open to all, must include original sample | original sample |
| 3. | random community sample | community forums open to all | random sample of community forum participants |
| 4. | (no event) | public education period, no community forums | random sample of community forum participants |
| 5. | (no event) | community forums open to all | delegates from community forums |
| 6. | (no event) | community forums open to all | random community sample |
| 7. | (no event) | community forums open to all | random sample of community forum participants |
| 8. | (no event) | community forums open to all | delegates from community forums plus random community sample |
| 9. | (no event) | community forums open to all | random sample of community forum participants, plus random non-participants |

## Notes

1. Lawrence Susskind and Jeffrey Cruikshank, *Breaking the Impasse: Consensual Approaches to Resolving Public Disputes*, Basic Books: New York, 1987, pp. 3, 8.
2. William Schneider, "An Insider's View of the Election," *The Atlantic Monthly*, July 1988; and "JFK's Children," The Atlantic Monthly, March 1989.
3. John McKnight, "Regenerating Community," *Social Policy*, Winter 1987, pp. 54-58.
4. Charles Anderson, "Political Philosophy, Practical Reason, and Policy Analysis," in *Confronting Values in Policy Analysis: The Politics of Criteria*. Eds. Frank Fischer and John Forester. Sage: Newbury Park, CA, 1989, p. 34.
5. Douglas Torgerson, "Between Knowledge and Politics: Three Faces of Policy Analysis," *Policy Sciences*, 1986, vol. 19, p. 34.
6. Benjamin Barber, "America Skips School: Why we talk so much about education and do so little," *Harper's Magazine*, November 1993.
7. Eugenie Gatens-Robinson, "Beneficence and the Habilitation of People with Disabilities," *Contemporary Philosophy*, vol. xiv, no. 2, pp. 8 ff.
8. Michael Kinsley, "You Still Can't Have It All," *Time*, Sept. 21, 1992, p. 72.

9. Elizabeth Royte, "Other People's Garbage. The new politics of trash: A case study," *Harper's Magazine*, June 1992.
10. A genuine public choice doesn't require that literally every citizen participate actively all the time. What is essential, is that (1) everyone has the opportunity to participate actively, should he or she want to; (2) everyone feels that deliberating with his or her fellow citizens is the most effective way of ensuring that his or her concerns and interests are addressed; and (3) even if a person doesn't participate actively, he or she feels that his concerns, interests, and needs have been understood, appreciated, and acknowledged as a result of participation by people like himself in the process of defining the problem, establishing priorities, and setting a policy direction.
11. John Gastil, *Democracy in Small Groups: Participation, Decision Making & Communication*, New Society Publishers: Philadelphia, PA, 1993, p. 28.
12. A random sample this small does not permit us to generalize with a plus-or-minus four percentage points small margin of statistical error from the group's judgment to a conclusion about what the community as a whole would judge, were all its members it to undergo the process. Nevertheless, including randomly selected citizens will afford us relatively better information about the judgment that would emerge from a fully inclusive community deliberation than we

could obtain in any other fashion. Polls and surveys do not capture what a community thinks, because a community is not the same thing as a collection of individuals. A community is not equivalent to the sum of all the individuals in a community. Moreover, there is an important difference between what the sum total of individuals happen initially to think about some question and what the people of a community think as a community after they've had a chance to discuss it together. Public opinion is what individuals say—more or less off the tops of their heads—when they are asked a question. In contrast, the community's judgment does not exist until members of the community have deliberated together. When they have done so carefully and thoroughly, a sense of the community emerges. The community does not exist until, through deliberation, it comes into existence. People must form themselves into a public.

13. John Stuart Mill, *Principles of Political Economy, and Chapters on Socialism*, Oxford University Press: Oxford, New York, 1994. [Originally printed in 1848.]
14. James S. Fishkin, *Democracy and Deliberation: New Directions for Democratic Reform*, Yale University Press: New Haven, 1991. See also Yankelovich's book, referenced on page 6.
15. Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich: San Diego, New York, London, 1968, pp. 4-5.

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# DELIBERATIVE